

COMMENTS - So much rain has fallen at the abandoned Piney Point phosphate plant this summer that state officials say they could be forced to resume dumping treated wastewater into an aquatic preserve at the mouth of Tampa Bay.

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Rains may again force state to dump wastewater in preserve

By CRAIG PITTMAN, Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG - So much rain has fallen at the abandoned Piney Point phosphate plant this summer that state officials say they could be forced to resume dumping treated wastewater into an aquatic preserve at the mouth of Tampa Bay.

"We would like not to," Phil Coram of the state Department of Environmental Protection said Thursday. Still, he said, "you have to consider that as a contingency."

The heavy rains have wiped out the gains DEP made disposing of waste from the plant, located just south of the Hillsborough-Manatee county line, by dumping it in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Unfortunately, despite their best efforts they're going backwards," said David White of the Ocean Conservancy, which has criticized the gulf dumping.

The news that the DEP might resume dumping into Bishop Harbor, which is part of the Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve, did not surprise Manatee County officials who had worked to end the dumping that occurred there before.

"I think everybody is under the realization now that we have to use all options," said Rob Brown, the county's water quality administrator.

The summer rains have been DEP's worst enemy. This month alone, more than 7.5 inches of rain have fallen on the plant. Every inch of rain adds 12-million gallons of water to the plant's waste ponds, which means August's rainfall added about 90-million gallons to the highly acidic soup.

"August has been very bad," Coram said.

Since the gulf dumping began July 17, Coram told officials from the Agency on Bay Management, the barge hauling the treated waste into the gulf has made six trips and disposed of 32.7-million gallons.

That's less than DEP officials had expected because technical problems with the barge have prevented it from carrying its full load of 7.5-million gallons. Instead the most it has been able to carry is 5.5-million gallons per trip, Coram said.

The state must stop dumping Nov. 30, when its federal permit expires.



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"They are racing the clock and right now they're losing," said Mitch Roffer, a Miami oceanographer monitoring the dumping for the fishing industry.

The DEP took over the plant two years ago when the owners went bankrupt and walked away. State officials feared the waste atop the plant's gypsum stacks would accidentally spill into Tampa Bay.

In late 2001, the water levels were so high that DEP officials dumped thousands of gallons of partially treated waste into Bishop Harbor - until local officials found out and protested.

The dumping resumed later, but only after the water was fully treated to lower the acid content. Tests are continuing to determine what effect the dumping has had on the aquatic preserve.

A storm on New Year's Eve dropped 16.5 inches of rain on Piney Point, leaving the plant close to overflowing. DEP officials sought federal permission for a plan to dump 700-million gallons in the gulf. In April the EPA approved gulf dumping of 534-million gallons.

However, because of delays in launching the barge and the problems with carrying a full load, Coram said Wednesday that the barge is unlikely to dispose of more than 200-million gallons by the time the permit expires.

That leaves another 800-million gallons for the DEP to deal with, White pointed out.

Coram did have some good news. There is still enough room to accommodate another 14.2 inches of rain, he said. That means a catastrophic spill into Tampa Bay is unlikely, he said.

The reason for so much room is that so far this year the state has disposed of 417-million gallons of waste. Nearly 300-million gallons went into Bishop Harbor. That dumping ceased the day the barge began, Coram said, but now the rain may force its resumption.